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AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTES BY MADAME BLANC.

COLLATED BY THEODORE STANTON.

BEFORE Mme. Blanc ("Th. Bentzon"), perhaps the most distinguished of living French female writers, sailed for America last spring on her second visit to our country, I asked leave to publish extracts from her letters to me, which I knew were replete with interesting paragraphs that, if carefully culled and put together, would make almost a complete autobiographical sketch. The permission was promptly granted, and this explains why publicity is given to the following unedited notes.

* * *

Here is an account of Mme. Blanc's life from her birth to the moment when she entered upon her literary career :

"I was born at Seine-Port, a delicious village in the Department of the Seine et Oise, where lived Villemessant, the famous founder of *Le Figaro*, in a place once owned by my grandmother ; where still resides the venerable M. Legouv  , and where first saw light M. Berthelot, both members of the Academy. From my cradle days I was surrounded by types which no longer exists of the old French social system. Thus, I was in the charge of one of those legendary nurses, who, after spending thirty-seven years in the same family, drew her last breath surrounded by her master and mistress and the children whom she had brought up ; I was served by faithful old domestics, the like of whom are no longer seen ; my spiritual welfare was cared for by the rustic country priest, an almost daily commensal at our house, while the schoolmaster was accustomed to make his appearance in blouse and wooden shoes. And what picturesque relatives I had !

"My grandmother, after the death of Major-General Adrien Benjamin de Bentzon, who was governor of the Danish Antilles, married the Marquis de Vitry, a perfect type of the old r  gime, whose full name and prowess are recorded in M. de Foudra's

book, entitled *Les Gentilshommes Chasseurs*. Ex-musketeer of the King, ex-officer of the body guard under the Restoration, I looked upon my grand stepfather as if he were my real grandfather, so tenderly had he acted toward my mother from her seventh year. M. de Vitry was a boy of thirteen or fourteen when the great Revolution broke out and remembered it perfectly well. He was a superbly handsome man, always young, good beyond conception, and so prodigal that several fortunes slipped through his hands. I never remember seeing him in other than a modest situation, which he bore as nobly as the luxury of his better days.

“My grandmother cared no more than he did about these changes of fortune. She always had enough with which to do good, and was the ministering angel of the country round about the Orléanais village where was their country home. In my childhood I lived there a good deal. My parents spent the summer in Touraine and the winter in Paris. But circumstances caused myself and brother to be often with my mother in that dear home whose customs, when I compare them with those of to-day, seem to have dated a century back.

“An admirable English governess started me and my brother on our education. It is to her that I am indebted for my love for English literature. She set me to reading works which were far beyond my years, but which I understood very well. After the *Waverley Novels*, I was carried away by Washington Irving, which was my first acquaintance with America.

“While still very young, I was discovered to have literary tastes, though of course the thought that some day I would enter upon the career of an author never occurred to anyone, and if it had, it would probably have horrified everybody. I was eight years old when my English governess went into raptures over this phrase, which she underlined: “A rosy smile dimpled thy round cheek.” It occurred in an elegy to ‘My Broken Doll,’ written in English. I have never forgotten that line. I stood high in the classes in composition and rhetoric, and my father, while careful not to awaken vanity in me by too much complimenting, often carried off in his pocket my copy-books in order to show them to admiring friends. Mine was an education by fits and starts without diplomas at the end, with much reading and dreaming, with meditation in the country and with some travel, especially a

never-to-be-forgotten sojourn in Germany, But certainly the most perfected curriculum of studies would not have been so favorable to the awakening and development of the imagination.

“At the bottom of all that I have done I find the moral influence of my mother, who especially preached by example; the British impulse given me by my dear Miss Robertson, who inculcated love of truth and simplicity; the traditions at the home of my grandparents, who kept me a century behind in many things; a passionate love of nature due to long years spent in the country where I have passed the greater part of my life; the keen sensations of the beauties of a landscape; the precocious curiosity to learn and the revealed happiness which comes from scribbling.

“I was married at sixteen. Three years of sorrow followed, in which maternity had its place. Then the melting away of what fortune I had, justified the development and affirmation of my literary tastes. Consequently, I have always looked upon poverty as an obliging friend, for it placed the pen firmly in my hand. Though I had long written for my own amusement, only once had I seen myself in print, and, curiously enough, I made this *début* in English dress. I had translated *Les Bachibouzouks* of Viscount de Noé, one of our friends. These episodes of the Crimean War had appeared in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* in 1859. It would be quite impossible for me to perform such a feat to-day. In fact, I have always suspected that Colonel de Noé, who was English on his mother's side, must have touched up the manuscript before publishing it, if it really did appear, which he told me was the case.

“My mother married twice, her second husband being Count d'Aure, equerry of the Emperor and a superior man in every respect. He was my literary providence. It was through him that I made the acquaintance of George Sand, that woman of genius, whom I visited at Nohant, and whose counsels and encouragement I enjoyed. She recommended me in vain to Buloz. But my talents, in which she believed—she would often say to me: ‘At twenty-two I could not have done what you are doing’—were not yet ripe for the *Revue des Deux Mondes*.

“One day Mme. Sand urged my stepfather to read the charming first book—*Un Cheval de Phidias*—of him who has since become a celebrated novelist, Victor Cherbuliez. I reviewed it for a

sporting journal. George Sand sent the author my notice without telling me so, and Cherbuliez returned a word of thanks to the office of *La France Hippique*, supposing it the work of some man on the staff. I replied, without revealing my identity, and if my letters seemed to interest him, it is mainly because I was aided by the thorough knowledge concerning things equestrian possessed by my stepfather, who was one of the most famous horsemen of France, having commanded at the Saumur Cavalry School, where his methods are still quoted as authority on equitation. And thus it happened that I was in correspondence with Cherbuliez for over twenty years before making his personal acquaintance. I have still two or three precious letters of his which I carefully guard, especially the last one, addressed to M. d'Aure, who finally let him into the long-kept secret.

“But the person to whom I am the most indebted in the matter of literary advice is the late M. Caro, the famous Sorbonne professor of philosophy and himself an admirable writer, who, as he used to say, put me through a course of literature, acting as my guide through a vast amount of solid reading and criticising my work with kindly severity.”

* * *

In another place Mme. Blanc thus speaks of her own father:

“I have social affinities with Germany, my father's family being of Teutonic origin. My father's life was most adventure-some, most romantic, being dominated by the passions. I have always thought that perhaps it is a law of heredity that the active qualities of the father are transmuted in the children into imaginative qualities. I sometimes think that I must have dreamed what he lived. My idealism, my enthusiasm, my sentimentality, are German qualities, though held in check by certain other French ones. This mixture of races surely explains a kind of moral and intellectual cosmopolitanism which is found in my nature. My father of German extraction, my mother of Danish—my *nom de plume*, which was her maiden name, is Danish—with Protestant ancestors on her side, though she and I were Catholics; my maternal grandmother a sound and witty Parisian, gay, brilliant, lively, with imperturbable physical health and the consequent good spirits,—surely these materials could not have produced else than a cosmopolitan being.”

* * *

So much of Mme. Blanc's literary work has been in the form of criticism that this paragraph is interesting :

"It is impossible for me to make so generous a confession as yours as regards literary criticism. I have very often severely censured what is bad, not, however, from a moral standpoint, but from a purely literary one ; for, in the eyes of a true critic, it is, perhaps, the greater crime to violate the laws of literary taste. What always shocks me is a judgment based on any other than purely literary ground."

* * *

In this same letter occurs this rather curious history of *Un Divorce*, one of Mme. Blanc's earliest novels, which was republished last year :

"It is not, as one of my American critics seems to think, the first gropings of an inexperienced pen. For ten years I had already been writing in the newspapers before I produced this book. At that time women long hesitated before bringing out a volume. M. Bertin, the famous editor of the *Journal des Débats*, having read one of my novels in a periodical which no longer exists—the *Revue Moderne*—probably discovered some merit in it, for one morning his nephew, the late Léon Say, afterwards a distinguished public man, called on me and invited me to write a story for the *feuilleton* page of the *Débats*. I promised to have one ready in six months, and thereupon left for Goslar, Germany, where I used sometimes to spend my vacations and where I had relatives and friends. My tale was finished and in the hands of the *Débats* when the Franco-Prussian war broke out. I thought it would never be printed, for sympathetic Germans were not likely to please the French reading public after 'the terrible year,' at the moment when Paul de St. Victor seemed to have struck a popular note by declaring Teutons to be barbarians and bandits. To my grand surprise, however, M. Bertin had the courage to publish my story. While it was coming out, my friends, M. and Mme. Caro, who were at Roujoux, in Savoy, the guests of François Buloz, founder of the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, called his attention to this new production of an author whose MSS. he had frequently rejected, notwithstanding the warm support of George Sand. He was sufficiently struck by the story to ask me immediately for a novellette—*La Vocation de Louise*—which appeared in January, 1872,

and whose success opened to me definitively the pages of the *Revue*. Thus I owe everything to *Un Divorce*. It is the key to my career. Although, when examined from the standpoint of a knowledge of one's trade, I could do better now, I feel pretty sure that the critic who places *Un Divorce* in the first rank among my imaginative works does not go far wrong."

* * *

In another letter Mme. Blanc writes:

"My relations with America have almost always been of a kind which create and strengthen lasting sympathies. Let me give you a few examples of this.

"I had translated Bret Harte when I received a letter from Ralph Keeler, who afterwards disappeared so mysteriously, being probably lost at sea, addressed to 'Mr. Bentzon,' and inspired by a most disinterested friendship for Aldrich. The letter called my attention to *Marjorie Daw*. I immediately translated it and it appeared over the author's name alone—I rarely sign my translations—in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* of January 1, 1873. Aldrich afterwards told me of the joy of his friend when the latter handed him the periodical without saying a word as to who had thus worked for his glory. This was the origin of my twenty-five years' friendship with the Aldrichs.

"I owe one of the dearest affections of my life to an article entitled *Le Roman de la Femme-Medecin*, which appeared in the *Revue* of February 1, 1885, inspired by Sarah Orne Jewett's *Country Doctor*.

"So when I went to America for the first time in 1893 I had these true old friends and several years of intimate correspondence with them based on an exchange of ideas quite equivalent to a life-long of visits.

"But, however much I may be indebted to your country, I think I may feel that I have paid back this indebtedness in part at least by the publication of my book, *Les Américaines Chez Elles*, which has done not a little to advance in France the moderate and rational side of the woman cause. My book cannot be understood in the United States, where I am found to have said only what everybody knows there, but what nobody knows here, this last fact being its *raison d'être*."

* * *

I might go on and give further extracts from the sheets lying

before me. But the above will suffice to call renewed attention to a delightful French woman, whose real sympathy for us and our institutions, whose broad understanding of America and Americans, things so exceedingly rare among her fellow countrymen and women, will not probably be the least of her merits, and she has many, in our eyes.

THEODORE STANTON.